

# Chapter One

“What world is this?” Destin said. He had been talking to himself more and more. He hadn’t seen anyone else in a long time. He was all alone, and there wasn’t anyone on this planet. His scans had turned up no life forms.

He stood on the loading ramp of his small starship. He stared in wonder at the land.

This planet was green and lush. Trees and grass and flowers sprang up all over. There was a large lake with bright blue water. And mountains with real snow on them.

“Epic,” Destin said.

*What world, what kingdom, what shores?* Words floated in his mind. They were bits and pieces of old books he’d read. He’d found the books stashed in a locker at his bunk. Whoever had used the ship before Destin had left them there. The IRIS Corp, his owners, did not allow him to own books. They didn’t like their fleet knowing too much. So Destin had only ever read books about flying and tech and star maps. He could get in a lot of trouble for having the old books. But this was a one-pilot starship, made to carry only

one Raider. It wasn’t that hard for Destin to hide them.

Raider, Destin thought. How he hated the name IRIS had given young pilots like him. It was a Raider’s job to search the galaxy for energy to steal from distant stars. The best energy came from the suns of small planets. Their energy could be “taken” by the Star Eater tech on board a Raider’s ship. A small sun could fill the energy cells all the way up, so Destin would only have to make one trip. He’d steal the energy and then carry it back to base. Done.

IRIS didn’t like it when their Raiders went off course. And they *really* didn’t like it when Raiders left airspace to visit planets. Destin was never supposed to set foot on the

ground. He was trained to stay on his ship at all times. All IRIS cared about was the energy. They didn't care about Destin. He could die out in space and they'd just replace him.

But he'd still decided to break all the rules and visit this planet. What kind of danger was out there in the green trees? It was unsafe enough to land, but to stand there with the door open? Very risky. He wasn't even sure what he'd meant to do. Take a peek? But then he'd seen how pretty it was.

It was a land he'd only ever seen on screens or in his dreams. And the *light*. The sunlight shone down over everything. It was this light that made him walk to the edge of the ramp. His toes were inches from the ground.

Destin took a deep breath and stepped forward. And that was it. He'd done it. He was standing on a strange planet. In the sun. He turned his face to the sky. It was so warm. And so bright! When he looked away, tiny orbs of light danced in front of his eyes.

He'd trained to eat suns since he was a small child. He'd flown short missions since he was fifteen. And now he was a pilot of his own Raider ship at seventeen. But he'd never felt the warmth of a real sun on his face.

He walked a few more steps away from his ship and felt a warm breeze rush past him.

He knew he could get into a lot of trouble for this, so he had to cover his tracks. He turned his nav system off so the stop

wouldn't show up on his flight log. He loved hand flying anyway.

The beeper on his wrist chimed. Spirals of red were spinning down. They showed the status of his ship's Star Eater energy cells. They were getting too low. He was going to have to steal this warm sun away from this beautiful planet. It was the last thing he wanted to do.

The beeper chimed again. The sound would only repeat, faster and faster, until he did something about it. He didn't have much time. Destin sighed and took one last look at the pretty planet before walking back into the cold steel of his ship.

He sat in the pilot chair and spun around to the helm. He checked his systems. Energy was in the red zone—too low—but the Star

Eater was ready to launch. He closed the doors and sealed off the hull and then lifted off. He shot straight up into the sky and watched as the green and blue got farther away. Soon he was back in the dark of space, with the planet below him.

Destin was about to bring the nav system back online when he saw his comms screen blinking.

"Oh no," Destin said. His voice was a lonely sound in the empty ship. "Three missed hails. Destin, you fool."

IRIS had tried to hail him while he was off looking at the planet's surface. With a shaking hand he pressed the *comms* button.

There was a trill as the call went through. Then the tight face of his boss, Captain

Juno, flashed on the screen. She did not look happy. This was bad. Captain Juno was a scary woman. She cared about nothing but the energy.

“Raider 1984-225, you have not answered your comms. Report at once,” Juno said.

“I...I...was fixing some bugs on my system,” Destin said, coming up with a quick lie. “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

Juno frowned. “What is your current status, Destin X?”

She had called him by his name. Destin wasn’t sure if that was good or bad. All the other kids like him—ones raised by IRIS to fly Star Eaters—were called X. No last names. No history. No parents. No families. And no way to trace a Raider as they went

missing on missions or in “accidents” at the training hub.

Destin swallowed. His throat was so dry. “I am almost done my mission,” he said. “I found a good star. I will be returning to base soon.”

Juno leaned toward the comms screen. “IRIS needs the energy, Destin X,” she said.

“I understand,” said Destin. “I’ll get it.”

“Be sure that you do,” said Juno. “You are a new Raider. IRIS needs you to work hard. If you don’t, we will have to pull you. And...send you back to the hub.”

Destin’s heart began to pound so hard that he thought Juno would hear it from across the galaxy. He nodded. “I...understand.” Not the hub. No way. Anything but the hub.

With that, the hail link ended and the screen went blank.

“I have to steal this sun,” he said. He started the Star Eater sequence but paused before hitting the final command button. His fingers shook. He didn’t want to hurt the planet. But he had to, didn’t he?

## Chapter Two

“Push the button,” he said. “Just push it and do your job. Or someone else will.” His finger hovered over the large green button on his control panel.

Destin knew that if he stole the energy from the sun, it would die. And that meant the planet would die too. It would freeze over and turn to ice.